

Shoni Crydd – Exemplary Welshman

by Gwyn Williams

Shoni Crydd, as his name suggests, was a shoemaker. JOHN THE COBBLER, the English newspapers called him in 1830 when, in good if premature Sun style, they dubbed him THE TERROR OF MERTHYR.

Shoni Crydd (baptised John Thomas) was in 1830 a parish constable of Merthyr Tydfil. That is, he was one of the drunken, corrupt, semi-literate and boorish thugs who maintained Law and Order (a Thatcherite virtue) in the largest town in Wales.

This Mafia at the heartland was led by Peter Charters an immigrant from Bristol (does this sound familiar?). They specialised in blackmail. The new Beer Act of 1830 had introduced free trade, in good Thatcherite style. Henceforth, any clown could brew any kind of poisonous swill he/she liked and palm it off as 'beer' without a licence. (Freedom, it's called: see under *Press, Freedom of.*)

Most of the beershops of Merthyr (*cwrw bachs* they were called, in their engaging local patois) were run by little old women who were mostly the widows of men killed in the iron trade. They couldn't read Hansard. They couldn't have read it, even if it had been in Welsh.

So in move Peter Charters and his Merry Men. Pay up, they said, or we'll shop you to the Justices for running a beershop without a licence. Little old women who were ignorant, and who were condemned to ignorance by their inescapable predicament, paid up. The leading figure in this scenario of irredeemably private enterprise was Shoni Crydd – the 'most hated man in Merthyr', to quote a Fleet Street journal wise after the event.

Only one person stood up to Shoni Crydd.

This was a young miner of 22, Richard Lewis, known as Dic Penderyn. A bit twp, a bit slow on the uptake. But a young man who thought an ignorant old Mam needed protecting, who had some stupid idea about *Cyfiawnder* – Justice – an absurd slogan which his mates scrawled on placards only a few months later. Dic Penderyn stood up to Shoni Crydd. They had a fist fight in the middle of *China*, the no-go district outside the law by the bridges. Dic Penderyn thrashed the living daylight out of Shoni Crydd.

Comes the Merthyr Rising of June 1831. Half the population of Merthyr decides to thrash the living daylight out of Shoni Crydd. Who saves him? Lewsyn yr Heliwr, Lewis the Huntsman, leader of the rebellion. The crowd are relentlessly beating Shoni Crydd to death, when Lewsyn yr Heliwr jumps down from the wall. 'Honour! Honour!' he shouts, 'he's had enough! Enough!' Lewsyn saves Shoni's life.

Undeterred, as soon as the Rising is broken by a thousand soldiers and a hundred grasses, Shoni Crydd presses forward. He submits a case, with proper notes, charging persons innumerable in 36 different incidents. If Shoni Crydd had had his way at that moment, half the population of Merthyr Tydfil would have been charged with High Treason (mark you, this *would* have been *reasonable*... but *impractical*, if you take my meaning?). He shops Lewsyn yr Heliwr.

More importantly, as it turns out, he sets a trap for Dic Penderyn. As soon as the Rebellion is over, they go to Dic's house. He isn't

there. Some creep tells them he's in hiding on Aberdare Mountain (where he ran away after the shooting outside the Castle Inn, where two dozen men and women died). So they wait for him. They have to wait four days. But it was worth it. In the end, they catch him, coming home for a kip. Shoni Crydd gets his own back.

What happens then? Why, damn it, Lewsyn and Dic are both condemned to *death*! And the result?... Shoni Crydd gets an attack of conscience! As anthropologists tell us, among 'primitive' peoples, such as the inhabitants of Merthyr Tydfil in 1831, public execution, state murder, is regarded with even greater horror than murder itself! Shoni Crydd, to use the vernacular, goes round the bend. He wanted Lewsyn and Dic shopped, but not HANGED, for God's sake!

When Joseph Tregelles Price, the Quaker ironmaster of Neath, starts to get up petitions for the reprieve of Lewsyn and Dic, Shoni Crydd rushes forward. He drafts a formal statement, signed John Thomas and all, in support of Lewsyn. Lewsyn's sentence is duly commuted to transportation to Australia for life. Shoni tries to do the same for Dic Penderyn.

But it's too late for Dic. After the reprieve for Lewsyn, William Meyrick the lawyer and the respectables are determined that *somebody* must hang. James Abbott, a lying Tory barber, who makes perjury a profession, is firm against Dic. Nobody listens to Shoni. He blows his top. He goes around the pubs of Merthyr, calling Abbot a liar and threatening to top him. They call the cops in... against a parish constable. Dic Penderyn is hanged and Shoni Crydd vanishes from history.

For three years. In 1834, the papers report his death. They say he died poverty-stricken, leaving a wife and four children destitute. The local paper, a bilious Tory rag, reports, po-faced, that Shoni had been 'charitable and benevolent' and that Merthyr people, moved to tears, were raising a fund for the widow and her kids. The 'terror of Merthyr' died poor, but popular and respected. It is easy to see why.

An intriguing story, don't you think? Worthy of Alexander Cordell, maybe? Worth more than that, I think. Take a long, cold look at your own life, friend. Have you contributed to the creation of the Labour hegemony in Wales, today's Peter Charters? Are you a Shoni Crydd? Are you going to see the light... too late? Who's going to raise a fund to keep your kids Welsh?

